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The Creation of Myth with the Idiot as Hero in *El bazar de los idiotas*

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Among the new writers who have appeared on the literary scene in Colombia in the years following the publication of *Cien años de soledad* (1967), possibly the most promising is Gustavo Alvarez Gardezabal. His volume of short stories, *La boba y la buda* (1973), and first three novels, *La tara del papa* (1971), *Condores no entierran todos los días* (1972), and *Dabeiba* (1973), chronicle the history of the city of Tuluá during the turbulent epoch of undeclared civil war in Colombia. His fourth novel, *El bazar de los idiotas* (1974), represents an intermediate step in his literary production currently totalling six novels, including *El titiritero* (1978) and *Los mlos* (1981), with a seventh, *Pepe botellas*, to be released shortly. With *El bazar*, Gardezabal concludes his portrayal of Tuluá, and offers a distinctly imaginative depiction of the town, concentrating on societal rather than political problems in Colombia.

Utilizing the structure and traditional concepts common to ancient mythology, Gardezabal creates his own fantastic version of the heroic epic in order to examine defects which he believes corrode and encumber society. Through his skillful manipulation of time and structure in the novel, Gardezabal transforms Tuluá into a universal microcosmos of society, thereby revealing faults characteristic not only of Tuluá and Colombia, but also of the world in general. An unidentifiable, third person narrator recreates the bizarre, forgotten history of Tuluá in terms of cycles of human life, in a manner comparable to the anonymous narrative style employed in mythology. The central characters of *El bazar*, two idiots named Bartolomé and Ramón Lucio, become the heroes of Tuluá, reproducing the archetypal mythic quest and effecting major changes in their community.

El bazar relates the fantastic story of three generations of a controversial family of Tuluá: After a scandalous love affair with the priest of the town, Manuela Barona gives birth to Marcianita Barona. Shocked by the illegitimate birth and fearing God's retribution, the people of Tuluá coldly scorn Manuela and her daughter, forcing them to live a life of virtual isolation. Marcianita gradually gains esteem through her incredible talent for embroidering, coordinating the bazaar, and raising jasmine and armadillos. After marrying Nemesio Rodríguez, Marcianita gives birth to two retarded children, Bartolomé and Ramón Lucio. The idiots lead virtually uneventful lives until their adolescence when one day they are discovered masturbating. Witnessing this act, their only close friend, don Diego Hayer, is miraculously healed of a strange ocular ailment for which he had long sought a cure. After supervising several more "trial" cures, Marcianita deduces that the miracles are not a result of the sexual act, but rather are caused by the curious sound which the boys emit during masturbation. She then begins the transformation of her children into world

renowned heroes, whose daily curative ceremonies become the center of harsh controversy while turning Tuluá into the mecca of the world.

In a magical realist style similar to that of *Cien años de soledad*, Gardeazábal transforms the real town of Tuluá into a fictitious world of phenomenal occurrences and peculiar people, and like García Márquez, he employs exaggeration in order to describe "un mundo hiperbólico donde todo es posible porque eliminan los límites normales de lo 'real' y lo 'normal.'"¹ Yet Gardeazábal takes the technique of magical realism a few steps farther, raising the exaggeration to levels of absurdity. The incorporation of vocabulary, places, customs and people native to the Valle del Cauca and Tuluá adds a regional dimension to *El bazar*, yet Gardeazábal combines innovative narrative techniques and a unique temporal distortion in order to transform this regional story into a mythic tale. An explication of these technical manipulations reveals the manner in which he duplicates his creation of mythology within *El bazar* both through plot and narrative style.

In his recent analysis of *El bazar*, Raymond Williams acknowledges that the process by which the idiots "become" the heroes of Tuluá is of fundamental importance to the concept of the novel. He emphasizes the incongruent nature of this "becoming" as the most significant factor in the development of the structure.² By emphasizing the incongruencies in the narrative, many literary critics fail to recognize the accuracy of Gardeazábal's reproduction of the mythical heroic quest. And yet, without this recognition one cannot clearly explicate the themes of the novel, for it is only through the study of Gardeazábal's precise development of the archetypal adventure, a unifying factor in the structure and thematic goals of the novel, that one can fully comprehend the messages contained in *El bazar*. In a recent interview Gardeazábal explains that he created the two idiots as heroes because "La locura es una forma superior de la inteligencia. . . Muchos locos han sido los que verdaderamente gestan los cambios. Son los que con sus actitudes exóticas contra lo normal rompen la estructura vigente."³ As Raymond Souza indicates in his article on *El bazar*, "Nos hacen ver el mundo de una perspectiva nueva y evaluarlo de una manera distinta."⁴ The discordant elements within this reconstructed myth are not of importance to the novel simply for their humorous and satiric effect, but rather because they emphasize the equally absurd incongruencies of contemporary society--the inconsistencies propagated by bureaucratic institutions, governmental and religious organizations. Just as the illogical and incredible exaggerations in the novel are accepted as normal in the reality of Tuluá, the absurd association of masturbation and mental retardation with the heroic must be accepted as "real" and "credible" by the reader if he is to recognize the significance of the heroes. In his excellent study of *El bazar*, William Siemens reveals several elements of mythic traditions hidden within the narration, particularly concentrating on the heritage and birth of the heroes and the significance of names, in order to expose one of the major themes of the novel, power manipulation.⁵ A closer analysis of the text and the characters themselves will illustrate additional elements of the hero archetype displayed by the two idiots and, most importantly, the manner in which they fulfill their role as heroes, transforming and improving the mythical world of Tuluá.

The novel as a whole closely parallels the classic models of myth and legend. The narrator of *El bazar* attempts to reconstruct the forgotten history of Tuluá; its seven-

teen chapters alternately relate the chronological history of the idiots and their family, and focus on various bizarre inhabitants of Tuluá who later approach the idiots seeking either to denounce them or to be cured of some illness. Although this combination of distinct short tales and episodes within the text might divide the novel into a disjunctive, incohesive chaos of narration, Gardeazábal utilizes repetitious elements and manipulates the time factors in a manner that enables the reader to unite the various chapters and apparently unrelated characters and events into a comprehensible story. Thus the reader participates in the creation of this hero myth, restoring order to the chaotic recollection of history.

One of the salient features of Gardeazábal's experimentation in *El bazar* is related to the aspect of time and its role within the novel. The manipulation of time is central to the work's structural unity and also determines the narrator's role in *El bazar*. The intercalation of distinct plot lines automatically creates a distortion of the traditional linear development of plot. Tuluá's history is described in terms of repeated cycles of birth and death, just as mythology reconstructs the primordial cycles of creation-destruction-creation. The story is recounted from the perspective of a fictitious present moment, creating a cycle as the past is retold from beginning to end: "El ciclo que hoy apenas parece cerrarse, había comenzado desde el día en que el padre Severo Tascón, recién ordenado en la catedral de Popayán, llegó a Tuluá y se alojó en la casa de doña Manuela Barona . . . "6 The conclusion of this cycle is reflected at the end of the novel as time references such as "sólo ayer," "esta mañana," and "hace un rato" announce the gradual approach to the present time of the narration. The novel can also be perceived as a sequence of connected and interrelated cycles reflected by the chapter divisions and the narrator's referral to periods in the lives of the characters as cycles. Correlating past, present, and future events, Gardeazábal links past events to the future destiny of Tuluá, occurring simultaneously with the narration of the novel. Employing cyclical narrative and the blurring of temporal divisions, Gardeazábal transforms the real chronology of Tuluá's history into an imaginary, atemporal universe comparable to mythological lands.

The distorted and absurd history of Tuluá is presented by an apparently traditional, omniscient third person narrator, whose unusual function the reader soon recognizes. In *El bazar* the narrator relates a story whose details have long been forgotten by the inhabitants of Tuluá, therefore he must serve as both the recorder and the organizer of these past events.⁷ Assuming a role similar to that of the ancient bard, the narrator of *El bazar* speaks as the collective voice of the people, transmitting the tale in a style comparable to oral narration, exemplified by the frequent use of "dizque" and "diría."⁸ The narrator relates events in an order resembling the spontaneous manner in which they might be recalled -- following a chronological sequence with frequent interjections of brief tales about important individuals.

Since the narrator is the recorder of this history rather than a part of it, he is unable to analyze the characters psychologically. Furthermore, he frequently expresses doubt about both the accuracy of his narration and interpretation of events and the actions of the characters. The "facts" are often followed by a contradicting thought or explanation, or qualified as questionable by the use of such words as "tal vez," "deber," "nadie supo si. . .," and "acaso." These inaccuracies in the

narrative closely parallel the uncertainties which plague modern interpretation of ancient mythology.

Through the association of opposing concepts and traditional values in the narration of *El bazar*, Gardeazábal satirizes the absurd reversal of normally accepted values which occurs in Tuluá during the idiots' rise to heroic status. The central focus of the novel, the transformation of two retarded children into the heroes of Tuluá and the world, represents an incongruous application of the normal hero concept. Even more incredible is the absurd manner in which these heroes discover their divine healing power—during the climax of masturbation. The idiots are ironically described in ecclesiastical terms, while their competitors, representatives of Catholicism, are described in commercial or sexual terminology.⁹ During the healing sessions the idiots are always dressed in heavily brocaded garments similar to priestly vestments. One of their enemies denounces their curative rituals as a parody of papal appearances on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square. Those who come to Tuluá to view the idiots are referred to as "peregrinos" or "la multitud." Additionally, religious terminology is used for ironic effect; for example, to denote the various types of venereal diseases from which one character suffers—"gonorrea de obispo" and "gonorrea de seminarista" (p.78). These shocking applications of religious vocabulary obviously reflect Gardeazábal's low opinion of religious institutions in Colombia. Reflecting on his childhood, Gardeazábal recently confessed his motivation for such harsh satire: "Yo fui formando religiosamente, en una formación religiosa tal vez demasiado marcada en donde se me quitaron los valores de consideración y donde se me trataron de imponer como únicos valores de medida los de la religión."¹⁰ Through reversal and misapplication of religious values in *El bazar*, he attacks the unquestioned manipulation of power by the church and reveals its detrimental effect on society as well as upon the individual.

Gardeazábal consolidates his creation of myth via a conscious imitation of the pattern of mythic adventure, including a "separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" by the two idiots.¹¹ Some elements of the heroic model are omitted, but conflicting explanations, lack of certain information and abrupt ending provide opportunity for later generations to expand the myth of the idiot heroes.

The mysterious appearance of a wild mare in Marcianita's dreams during her pregnancy may be regarded as the classic supernatural announcement of heroic birth. The parents of the heroes also possess certain phenomenal powers. Marcianita is a person endowed with strange capabilities from the time of her youth and the father of the idiots, Nemesio Rodríguez, possesses a superhuman sexual drive. The idiots are conceived as a result of two unusually violent sexual encounters. After Nemesio's disappearance from Tuluá, Marcianita decides that he must have been a being from another world whose sole mission on earth was to father the two idiots: "el marciano era Nemesio Rodríguez que la había preñado y luego se había ido definitivamente para su mundo." (p. 275) The strange sexual relationship of the idiots' parents and the peculiar birth of the children closely parallel the mysterious motif of virgin birth through divine intervention.

Upon touching her son for the first time Marcianita "sintió temblar en su interior todo el poder extraño que había heredado de su padre." (p. 125) The two heroes of Tuluá are endowed with little or no mental capacity, yet Bartolomé is described as

possessing a "mitológica capacidad de tragar" (p. 130). Likewise, when the contents of a scalding kettle of milk miraculously bounce off Ramón Lucio, causing no pain and leaving no scar, Marcianita concludes that he has been endowed with supernatural powers. She dedicates herself to educating the children, developing their mental and physical capacities as much as possible because "tenía la ilusión de que sus idiotas eran un par de príncipes de otro mundo y que Bartolomé era el heredero." (p. 168) It is in fact Bartolomé who first discovers, and subsequently instructs his brother in masturbation within the privacy of their bedroom. This room is described as "herméticamente cerrada," "oscura," isolated from all outside contact and thus is comparable to the mythical "center" or "womb" of darkness into which the traditional hero enters in order to prepare for his mission on earth. The heroes of Tuluá spend their adolescent years in total isolation from the inhabitants of the town. Marcianita serves as their spiritual intellectual guide, filling the role of the traditional protective figure in mythology who guides the hero through a series of trial and learning experiences.

In *El bazar* the author describes the masturbation experience in symbolic terms that relate it to the mythological discovery of the boon, or superior power by the hero. Bartolomé considers his erect male organ as a herald signaling the beginning of heroic adventure: "Para Bartolomé fue como la trompeta que anuncia la entrada al reino prometido." (p. 178) After their self-induced ejaculations the two idiots remain in a trance-like state of shock "asustado de haber descubierto esa gloria que por siglos y siglos había estado retenida en sus cuerpos . . ." (p. 179). The idiots are now ready to cross the threshold and carry the boon to the rest of society: "Habían casi traspasado el umbral que por milenios esperaron para iniciar su labor en el mundo." (p. 177) The idiots' first sexual experience is reminiscent of primitive initiation rites into manhood, representing a loss of innocence and the end of puberty, while symbolically preparing the adolescent male for entry into the adult world. At this point the idiots discover the "mana," the boon, or what Mircea Eliade defines as "hierophany," a manifestation of the sacred "...in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane world.'"¹² It is of course the manifestation of this "hierophany" that traditionally elevates the ordinary individual to heroic status.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes the hero's return as an integral factor in becoming a hero for it is then that he confronts society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir, and takes the blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment, and good people at a loss to comprehend.¹³ Just as mythic heroes must face fierce criticism, the heroes of Tuluá must face opposition from representatives of the Church who feel that the miraculous powers of the idiots threaten their own ecclesiastical myths. Gardeazábal admits that his heroes "son idiotas, porque son los únicos que la gente no comprende."¹⁴ The idiots therefore must sustain the attacks of "racionalistas" who are unable to explain these miraculous cures through logical reasoning or scientific explanations. Only after the idiots pacify this hostility and thereby silence their opposition are they recognized as heroic figures "Las idiotas tomaron actitud de dioses" (p. 273); "eran una institución nacional" (p. 278). "La Rivera," their home, becomes "un hormiguero," the "foco universal."

The successful heroic quest should result in the release of the flow of life, or rejuvenation of society, revealing the "omnipotent Self, which dwells within us all."¹⁵ As a result of the boon which Bartolomé and Ramón Lucio bring to the citizens of

Tuluá, not only are individuals made whole as deafness is cured, the paralyzed and crippled walk again, and the emotionally troubled find solace, but Tuluá, also, experiences a reawakening as tourists flock to the town and citizens who had previously isolated themselves from the world emerge to participate in society once again. The series of vindictive actions which had plagued the city suddenly dissolves as Tuluá unites in a unanimous celebration of its newly discovered importance. "Fue Tuluá entero que se volcó arrepentido a convencerse de que los idiotas Marcianita eran suyos, que en su seno habían tenido el poder sobrenatural que a ningún otro pueblo le había sido concedido, y desfilando callada o bulliciosamente hasta hace un rato, dió el testimonio de aprecio por su verdad." (p. 301).

The myth of the idiots of Tuluá concludes in an appropriately heroic manner. Their ultimate departure is foretold in Chapter 17 when the wild mare of their mother's dreams returns to Tuluá. Whenever the mare draws near the idiots, a parrot begins to chant: "La nave volvió por ellos, la nave volvió por ellos . . ."; and a pilgrim then interrupts to sing "Se va la lancha" (p. 280). However, the omen hidden in these words is not revealed until the final pages of the novel, when the idiots appear before the crowds of Tuluá for the last time. Again the parrot shrieks "la nave vino por ellos," and seconds later an anarchist places a disguised bomb before the idiots which explodes, eliminating them from the face of the earth. This dramatic annihilation of the heroes suggests that the chant of the parrot has been fulfilled and that the idiots of Tuluá, like the figure of Quetzalcoatl, have departed on an imaginary ship which may one day return to bring the boon to earth again. The appearance of the anarchist indicates the beginning of another cycle of vengeance, isolation and hypocrisy which will necessitate the rediscovery of the boon. Thus the cycle alluded to throughout the novel ends only momentarily, and begins again almost immediately indicating man's continual search for coherence in the chaotic reality of his surroundings.

By means of such ridiculously heroic figures, Gardezabal reveals the detrimental effect of superstition, hypocrisy, greed and social segregation upon the solidarity and productivity of the world and individual communities. *El bazar* then, reduplicates human attempts to find a solution, a miracle "cure" for the problems which plague society. Unfortunately, neither the idiots, nor Catholicism, nor any heroic figure can end the injustices and imperfections of this world. Gustavo Alvarez Gardezabal provides no solutions within *El bazar* but illustrates rather that the "power" to solve conflicts and problems in society must be discovered within each individual and then shared with society. The cyclical quality of *El bazar de los idiotas* indicates that the "heroes" of society will ease the struggles only temporarily, for with their disappearance the cycle of the quest must begin once again, providing material for yet another myth. *El bazar de los idiotas* thus reflects the manner in which mankind continues to create myths through religion, politics, history and literature with the hope of gaining a greater insight and a deeper understanding of the reality of our contemporary society.

NOTES

¹Raymond L. Williams, "García Marquez y Gardezabal ante 'Cien años de soledad': un desafío a la interpretación crítica," *Revista Iberoamericana*, Nos. 116-117 (1981), 170.

²Raymond L. Williams, "Structure and Transformation of Reality in Alvarez Gardezabal: 'El bazar de los idiotas,'" *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 27, No. 2 (1981), 258.

³Gustavo Alvarez Gardezabal, Interview by Jeanne Thompson and Félix Bolaños, 21 April 1983, Lexington, KY.

⁴Raymond Souza, "Observaciones sobre la narración en 'El bazar de los idiotas,'" in *Aproximaciones a Gustavo Alvarez Gardezabal*, ed. Raymond L. Williams (Bogotá: Plaza y Janes, 1977), p. 147.

⁵William L. Siemens, "Tiempo y poder en 'El bazar de los idiotas,'" in *Aproximaciones*, ed. Raymond L. Williams, p. 180-93.

⁶Gustavo Alvarez Gardezabal, *El bazar de los idiotas* (Bogotá: Plaza y Janes, 1974), p. 9. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and are noted in the text.

⁷Raymond L. Williams, *Una década de la novela colombiana* (Bogotá: Plaza y Janes, 1980), p. 98.

⁸Wolfgang A. Luchting, "Apuntes para una lectura de Dabeiba," in *Aproximaciones*, ed. Raymond L. Williams, p. 147.

⁹Williams, *Una década*, p. 97.

¹⁰Alvarez Gardezabal, Interview.

¹¹Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 35.

¹²Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty, eds., *Myth, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 141.

¹³Campbell, p. 216.

¹⁴Alvarez Gardezabal, Interview.

¹⁵Campbell, p. 319.